

Red Channels, Leo Hurwitz, and American Documentary's Radical Roots  
by Matt Peterson

We've never really explained ourselves for choosing the name "Red Channels"--what it means, its history and connotations, and why we chose it to represent our efforts, now, in the 21st Century. But the occasion of the upcoming Anthology Film Archives series, "Leo Hurwitz and the New York School of Documentary Film," happening March 10-19, seems as good a time as any.

The "blacklist" in Hollywood was, we generally assume, a metonym; but there were a few well-known instances where a black list was literal (and publicly distributed, at that). Probably the best known was the Motion Picture Association of America's 1947 firing of "The Hollywood Ten"--a group of screenwriters and directors including Herbert Biberman, Edward Dmytryk, and Dalton Trumbo. Then there was the 1950 publication of a pamphlet, "Red Channels," by the news journal *Counterattack*.

"Red Channels" listed 151 individuals in the entertainment industry accused of being communist subversives. Officially sub-titled "The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television," the list included accountants, actors, attorneys, composers, conductors, designers, directors, journalists, lyricists, musicians, playwrights, producers, radio commentators, screenwriters, singers, songwriters, teachers, and writers. Among the 151 named were Stella Adler, Leonard Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein, Aaron Copland, Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, Lena Horne, Langston Hughes, Alan Lomax, Joseph Losey, Burgess Meredith, Arthur Miller, Zero Mostel, Dorothy Parker, Pete Seeger, Orson Welles, and the focus of this retrospective, Leo Hurwitz.\*

We re-appropriated "Red Channels" as a means to preserve in our contemporary memory the legacy of this moment in our country's political and cultural history; but also as a provocation to consider what this mid-century entertainment blacklist means to us now. What is so absorbing about this history is not just that our cultural producers would be openly deprived work for their supposed ideologies; but that the hypothetical ideologies of these cultural workers would be appraised as so imminent and potent a threat as to force the discriminatory and repressive hand of both state and private interests. What was clear then, as it should be now, is what's at stake: the effects and potential of a revolutionary cultural hegemony.

For the organizers of this series, Leo Hurwitz's son Tom\* and filmmaker Manfred Kirchheimer\*, the motivation was mostly historical--to re-establish the importance and significance of Leo Hurwitz and his collaborators in the development of documentary film. The motivation for us to align ourselves with it is, we hope, obvious. It is a rare opportunity to reconnect with, and reconsider, our country's radical filmmaking history; and by extension consider how it informs engaged media production today. This is, in summation, the essential--and most fundamental--purpose of our Red Channels project.

The films in this series--the first complete Leo Hurwitz retrospective in New York--include work from the Workers Film and Photo League (1930-1935), Nykino (1934-1937), and Frontier Films (1937-1941). Hurwitz's films are placed within a larger context, highlighting, in addition to his own work, the work of his partners and contemporaries--which included Joris Ivens, Lewis Jacobs, Irving Lerner, Jay Leyda, Ben Maddow, Sidney Meyers, Leo Seltzer, Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, and Willard Van Dyke. These films are a time capsule of the U.S. Left between the wars, with subjects including major historical events and issues during the Great Depression, documents of economic

istorical protests and rallies during the Great Depression; documents of organizing struggles in both our cities and small towns; and international reports from China, Mexico, Poland, Spain, etc. They are made in collaboration with Elia Kazan, Richard Leacock, Pare Lorentz, Lewis Mumford, Paul Robeson, and Barney Rosset\*, among others.

The moment in time at the heart of the series, the period from 1931-1942, is perhaps second only to 1967-1971 in terms of radically redefining the form and purpose of an American political cinema. As we sit in the beginnings of a new decade and century, and try to come to terms with our post-Bush era--and what feel like increasingly digitally-mediated forms of engagement--it feels like a pretty good time to look back.

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\*Many many other artists and entertainers would be blacklisted in the United States because of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the second wave—"Red Scare" often associated with Senator Joseph McCarthy. Too many to list.

\*Tom Hurwitz is an award-winning cinematographer who has worked with closely with Barbara Kopple, and many others.

\*Manny Kirchheimer was one of Leo's closest friends and collaborators. He is himself a filmmaker and professor. We have previously screened his film, Stations of the Elevated (1980).